

WHAT OREN CASS SUNSTEIN COULD LEARN FROM HENRY GEORGE COSTANZA

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Children of Mario and Coca-Cola: Japanese geometry and American pop brought to Brits at Sega Park arcade in Southampton. Photo by Tony Austin. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

Oren Cass's "[What Economists Could Learn From George Costanza](#)" (*The New York Times*, December 23) has forgotten what economics Henry George taught.

That's the pundit named Cass who invariably calls for constrictions on consumers, as opposed to Cass *Sunstein's* advocacy of "choice-preserving but psychologically wise interventions" that would make "automatic enrollment in government programs" the default (in the [words](#) of the University of Pennsylvania's Angie Basiouny).

In 2012, Oren Cass campaigned for Mitt Romney versus the incumbent who had Sunstein head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. If it's harder to tell the party lines apart three presidential elections later, maybe it's because such "choice" was an echo all along.

Oren Cass sees "the continued reliance on the theory of comparative advantage" as the fountainhead of America's economic woes, comparable to the *Seinfeld* sidekick's bad karma from stubbornly sticking to tuna sandwiches instead of trying chicken. If Adam Smithian academics come off as slightly more charitable in that analogy than NYU Marxist Bertell Ollman [likening](#) free-market libertarians to "people who go into a Chinese restaurant and order pizza," Oren Cass makes them seem more sinister than silly, asking rhetorically whether "the Uyghurs performing forced labor in the supply chains of China's refrigerator exporters are doing so in return for economic advice."

When labor *isn't* coerced, either directly or by restrictions on how it can be used, markets really do involve what the Cato Institute's Scott Lincicome calls "billions of humans freely cooperating for mutual gain" — a phrase Oren Cass sees as "spin" and "reframing" despite such liberty always being key to the case for *laissez-faire*.

Henry George noted in *Progress and Poverty* that "the pen with which I am writing is justly mine ... because transferred to me by the stationer, to whom it was transferred by the importer, who obtained the exclusive right to it by transfer from the manufacturer, in whom, by the same process of purchase, vested the rights of those who dug the material from the ground and shaped it into a pen." Such books he penned became some of the most celebrated international bestsellers of the nineteenth century.

At the close of the twentieth, Oren Cass's preferred George acknowledged that his outstanding high score on a Frogger arcade machine relied on "the perfect combination of Mountain Dew and mozzarella" — the product of an international web of influence that ushered pizza pies and piquant pixels (and Peking duck) across oceans. The April 1983 cover of *Video Games* magazine trumpeted "America's Newest Games: Q*Bert & Joust" as fresh homegrown rivals to the output of Japanese companies like Frogger's Konami and Sega, but they built on the European examples of Euclid, Escher and Excalibur.

In *The World According to Star Wars*, Sunstein perceived that "in a truly repressive society — one against which rebellion is most justified — it will be very hard to know the magnitude of people's dissatisfaction, because people *will not say what they really think*." Seemingly minor trade blockades can have a similar chilling effect.

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